AYC

“Uncle Sam Walks the Plank—The Trusts as Pirates”



C. Gordon Moffat’s cartoon, ”Uncle Sam Walks The Plank—The Trusts as Pirates”, depicts a corrupted society where the government is weak and overrun by wealthy, ambitious business owners. This cartoon was created on May 22, 1899, during the Gilded Age, in which the society was built like a plutocracy where the few wealthy dominated government. Published in *The Verdict*, this cartoon is very accurate of how people felt because it was drawn during the Gilded Age and is not an estimation of how people felt. This cartoon appropriately portrays the Gilded Age, because gilded means something that is covered with gold but is of little worth on the inside. Similarly the US was very wealthy and as producing a lot of supply however the true economy was depraved and corrupt. Moffat obviously felt that business owners were unethical, cruel, and were destroying America.

Because of the Industrial Revolution during the 19th century, big businesses including steel, oil, and railroad companies rose. These big businesses prospered and became the world’s wealthiest economy for many reasons: including a laissez-faire government and apathetic attitude towards public interest. Business owners started trusts that limited competition. These trusts were often only to the businesses’ advantage and rarely for the public’s needs. For example, many companies used interlocking directorates where companies would put their own employers onto the board of directorates to make decisions that would favor their company. The government tried to stop these trusts by passing the Interstate Commerce Act(ICA) in 1887 however it was rarely and poorly enforced. Later in 1890, the government tried to enforce the Sherman-Anti Trust Act, which had the same purpose as the ICA, however it was pointless as well. This lack of control made the government useless and the business owners easily pushed the government aside. In the cartoon, one of the pirates is pushing Uncle Sam, the icon of America, off the plank. This shows how easily the business owners could overthrow the government at the time. The pirates, or business owners, in the cartoon are raising a flag that has “trusts” and a skull with “labor” written on it. Because big business owners wanted to become as wealthy as possible, they carelessly used human workforce. Laborers were forced to work for long hours for minimum wage in dangerous and filthy conditions without many benefits. Many started unions including the American Federation of Labor and the Knights of Labor, however they hardly made a difference. This cartoon is mainly directed towards factory workers and people who felt oppressed by business owner authority. The main idea of this cartoon is to portray an ill-managed country during the Gilded Age that was being run by ignorant, self-seeking business owners who had no concern for public interest.